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Wabanaki Center Helps Strengthen Cultural Ties Through Drama

April 4, 2001

Media Contact: Peter Cook at 581-3756

ORONO – The Wabanaki Center at the University of Maine has received a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to continue its work on language and culture revitalization in Passamaquoddy communities in the state.

The three-year, \$146,000 grant was given as part of the foundation's Partnerships Affirming Community Transformation (PACT) program, which supports projects undertaken by artists and other cultural professionals that contribute to social change.

“This grant builds on a project that was done with the support of a fellowship I had with the Kellogg Foundation,” says Gail Sockabasin, director of the Wabanaki Center. “In the third year of that fellowship, we were given instructions to develop a project in the community.”

As director of the Wabanaki Center, Sockabasin provides support services for Native American students and serves as the liaison between the state's native communities and UMaine.

Sockabasin focused on the revitalization of the Passamaquoddy language and culture, and toward this goal, recruited the help of the Headliners Theater for Living of Vancouver, who introduced her to the concept of the Theater of the

Oppressed, based on “The Pedagogy of the Oppressed,” a book by Paulo Freire.

“Freire's message was that we learn through doing, practice and action and that real transformation comes through such action,” she says. “The Theater of the Oppressed was founded on this idea.”

In this form of education, plays are developed that deal with important cultural or social issues in a community.

Working with Sockabasin on this grant project is Vera Francis, a UMaine graduate and Passamaquoddy who was part of the original theater group for the theater presentation funded with the Kellogg grant. Francis is now a community educator and language researcher for the Wabanaki Center.

“Interactive theater implies that there will be a relationship between the audience and the performers,” says Francis. “When the play is presented, there will be moments that the audience will be invited to join the play, engage the performers and offer new perspectives on any portion of the play and perhaps move it toward a different solution.”

Francis says this allows the audience members to be participants in the process of education through the arts, rather than simply observers.

“The audience is as much a part of the process as the people who are giving of their time, energy and creativity to develop these plays,” she says.

Each play runs about 10 minutes and is presented to the audience through a character called the Joker. This character serves as the audiences' link to what is going on in the play, offering observation and commentary. When the play is given the second time, the Joker invites audience members to participate.

“The play becomes a sharing of experiences, which will then hopefully help members of the audience move toward resolving the struggles that are presented through the play,” says Francis.

She says the designing process of the new project is not fully complete, but hopes the finished product allows the community to consider more fully the importance of language to the concept of culture.

“I trust that what we end up creating is something reflective of our collective experience and thus relevant and authentic and authentic for our relatives within the Wabanaki region,” says Francis.

The Kellogg Foundation grant allowed Sockabasin to do a play at Pleasant Point on the topic of culture and language and develop a CD of Passamaquoddy language and songs.

She says the Rockefeller grant will allow her to continue her work of trying to strengthen the connection between young Passamaquoddys and their culture through the arts and a focus on the importance of the language.

“When we did the play, we focused our work on the Passamaquoddy language and experiences within the community,” says Sockabasin. “We focused on the language because we are in the process of losing our language. I believe that the values of how you encounter people and the environment around you has everything to do with the language you speak.”

Sockabasin says most people who are fluent in the Passamaquoddy language and oral tradition are those of an older generation. The younger generation, she says, is much more comfortable with English and the written word.

“The Passamaquoddy language wasn't written down until about 20 years ago. We have a very strong oral tradition,” says Sockabasin. “One of the central dilemmas of language revival is how do you get English speakers, who are very focused on the written word, to genuinely connect with a generation that is focused on the oral tradition.”

Sockabasin says the answer to this question comes in the use of art.

“The arts don't require the written word, they are an equalizer,” she says. With the new grant, she hopes to bring back the original players and hold a series of workshops to further train them in the concepts put forth by Freire's book.

Francis says she hopes the theater presentations serve to show the importance of community to those who participate.

“I think that having a strong sense of who you are is having a strong connection to your culture and your relationship with that culture,” says Francis. “We, as people, were not brought here to be alone. We are all members of a people, a tribe or a community.”

This grant will cover the costs of performances at the Passamaquoddy communities of Pleasant Point and Indian Township. A performance for other native communities is being considered as well.

“The idea is to build upon the skills of the original group so they can go back to the two Passamaquoddy communities,” she says. “We then want to bring those ideas out and share them with other native communities who might be able to gain something from them.”

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